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ABSTRACT

This study documents the struggles and successes of three Mexican American teachers over a 40-year period in the Alice Independent School District, Texas. In order to focus on the construction of the subjects' identity as Mexican American teachers, the interviews were transcribed and categorized into themes: parental influence, school experiences, extracurricular activities, college attendance, role models, discrimination, language, politics and career, significant points in career, positive and negative changes, and lessons learned. A brief biographical sketch emphasizing education and teaching experience is given for each teacher. Through the shared personal recollections of the interviews, the teachers demonstrate how their ethnic and personal self-concepts were constructed through strong parental influence and support; caring teacher role models in high school and college who challenged and motivated them; social interactions both in the classroom and in extracurricular activities; early discrimination, Chicano political empowerment, parental involvement, and discipline; and technological changes in education. In turn, the teachers challenged, cared for, and motivated their students as they had been. (SAS)

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Three Teachers' Histories: The Construction of Self-Identity

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Oral histories provide us with an opportunity to listen and learn from personal experiences. The narratives in this study allow us to experience in rich detail the struggles and successes of three Mexican American teachers in Texas. Mrs. Saenz, Mr. Ruiz and Mr. Yañez were selected for their successful reputations as teachers in Alice, a small predominantly Mexican American community in South Texas. Their lives have been successful both personally and professionally and it is their voices which tell the story best. As Mr. Yañez believes, the rise of the Chicano is apparent as education begins to provide more opportunities and it is his own words that verbalized the importance and need for giving voice to Chicanos, ". . . the Chicano community has something to offer and has had all these many years and it's being heard of now."

Though these teachers were born and raised in different cities, together they have invested over 110 years working for the Alice Independent School District. Their experiences were as unique as the storyteller yet collectively they painted a portrait of the life of Mexican American teachers beginning in the 1950s. Their stories centered on the factors which influenced their lives such as their family, language and their school experiences. Through these narratives an overall theme was woven, the construction of their ethnic identity as Mexican American teachers. How they defined themselves ethnically was a part of their stories regarding the support of their parents and teachers, their personal encounters with discrimination, and their views of teaching. This theme will be explored to provide a background for learning and a voice for understanding.

This project was undertaken to gather stories of Mexican American teachers in Texas. The goal of the study was to give voice to the lives of Mexican American educators and record their stories so that others could learn from their personal experiences. The open-ended interview guide was created by two other researchers at The University of Texas at Austin for the Oral History Collection at the College of Education. The guide focused on the educators' childhood, educational and professional experiences. The participants in the study were selected based on recommendations from community members. The first participant, Mr. Yañez, is well known in Alice for his many years of teaching at the local high school. The second educator, Mr. Ruiz, was suggested based on the many years he has worked for the Alice Independent School District. In following up Mr. Ruiz's interview, the name of the third participant, Mrs. Saenz, was provided along with others who had retired from the school district.

All three interviews were transcribed and coded into units of information and categorized by emerging themes following the method proposed by Merriam (1988) and Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, and Allen (1993). All categories arose from the data itself following a grounded theory approach (Merriam, 1988). These units centered on relevant factors which influenced their lives. These factors, parental influence, school experiences, and discrimination shaped their self-

identities and their views of teaching. How they constructed their self-identities became the theme of this study.

An Overview of Three Teachers' Careers

Amelia Saenz was born on March 2, 1924 in Sarita, Texas outside of Kenedy. Her mother died when she was a little girl and when she was 18 her father passed away. Mrs. Saenz, who had been attending high school in Rivera, then moved to Kingsville with one of her aunts while her two older brothers fought in World War II. After graduation from a Kingsville High School in 1943, Mrs. Saenz attended Texas A & I in Kingsville full-time for one year before starting her teaching career in Encino. She taught grades 1-6 in Encino for one year before moving to Palito-Blanco to teach second grade for two years. During these years, she was able to teach without a degree because of the shortage of teachers in these small, rural South Texas towns. Mrs. Saenz then taught one year in Kingsville, continued attending Saturday classes and graduated from Texas A & I in 1947. After getting married in 1948, she moved permanently to Alice where she taught for a continued thirty-seven years at three elementary schools, Saenz Elementary, Nayer Elementary, and Salazar Elementary. She retired in 1985 after forty years of teaching.

Candelario Ruiz and his three brothers and two sisters were born and raised in San Diego, Texas, a small town ten miles west of Alice. He helped his father on the family farm and attended school, graduating from San Diego High School in 1955. Mr. Ruiz attended Texas A & M in College Station, Texas for two years before transferring to Texas A & I in Kingsville. He graduated with a bachelor's in vocational education/ vocational agriculture in 1959. His first job was teaching vocational agriculture at the high school in Rio Grande City, Texas from 1959-1960. After completing his master's at Texas A & I in Kingsville, Texas, Mr. Ruiz returned to Alice accepting a fourth grade teaching position at Saenz Elementary School. Mr. Ruiz's career included teaching at Saenz for eight years followed by directing the Migrant Program for two years. He then served as principal of Mary R. Garcia Elementary for seven years and at Saenz Elementary for eighteen years. Mr. Ruiz is currently in his fourth year as Director of Personnel for the Alice Independent School District.

Benito Yañez was born in Corpus Christi, Texas in February of 1938. His parents, Jose and Alejandra, raised seven children, six of whom graduated from college. Mr. Yañez graduated from Roy Miller High School in Corpus Christi in 1957, and attended Del Mar Junior College for two years before graduating from Texas A & I in Kingsville with a Bachelors of Science in 1961. He began his teaching career in 1961 at Alice High School where he has been for the last thirty-seven years. Mr. Yañez completed a Masters in American history and secondary administration in 1967 from Texas A & I in Kingsville, Texas and can still be found in his classroom at Alice High School teaching government to graduating seniors.

The Construction of Self-Identity

Davidson (1996, p. 5) stated, "identity can be conceptualized as a process that develops in a matrix of structuring social and institutional relationships and practices." Self-conceptions including ethnic identity can be learned through interactions with others. How the three educators identified others as well as themselves was influenced by their childhood and educational experiences. Although I used Mexican American in each conversation, each narrator used a different term to identify people of Mexican heritage. Mrs. Saenz, who was raised in a rural area and seemed to remember no discrimination referred to Latin Americans. Mr. Yañez, who personally experienced discrimination as the first Mexican American on the high school faculty, used Chicanos. Mexicanos was the ethnic label used by Mr. Ruiz, who was raised in a rural, predominantly Mexican American community. These racial self-conceptions were constructed out of their own life experiences and shaped their teaching style and their connections with their students.

The Influence of their Parents

Perhaps the greatest influence in the lives of these educators was their parents. Although personally their parents had very little education, they encouraged and supported their children to better themselves through a good education. Both Mrs. Saenz and Mr. Yañez remembered their parents as receiving maybe a third or fourth grade education in South Texas and little else. Mr. Yañez proudly shared the educational success he and his siblings achieved although his parents had little formal schooling. He stated,

> I'm the second in a family of seven, six boys and one girl and all of them, except for one, has a college degree. Mom and Dad had very little schooling. Momma was to a great extent illiterate as far as English was concerned, but she could read and write Spanish. Dad was literate in both. He was self-taught.

Mr. Yañez estimated his father had about a third or fourth grade education and his mother about a second grade. Mr. Ruiz also spoke about the limited schooling his parents received. "He (father) didn't have much of an education, neither did my mom. Well, my mom didn't even go to school. My dad started and that was about it."

Yet despite the limited education their parents received, all regarded their family as their greatest supporters. Each of their parents was involved in their lives and education to the extent possible during those times. Mrs. Saenz shared,

> My daddy was very interested in us needing to get an education. He always said that, he had a little store, he always said that he sacrificed himself for us to go to school. So, I guess if he hadn't implied that on us, we wouldn't have been educated.

Mrs. Saenz and her brothers had to attend the high school in Rivera because Kenedy, near Sarita, where she was raised, did not have a school at that time. Her father was responsible for

transportation for his children and for the children of other ranch workers. "My daddy provided the car and everybody would pay him two dollars a month" for driving the children to and from school in Rivera.

Although Mrs. Saenz cautioned that parental involvement in the form of school related activities was limited during the 1930s and 40s, her father did as much as he could considering he had a business to manage and children to raise by himself. "Well, there were no PTAs at that time, there were just programs like [a] Christmas program. He would go to those but that's about it." Her father played a bigger role through his encouragement at home,

> Well, he would encourage us to go and study at night. He made us study with the [oil] lamps. We'd study with lamps and not to go to bed until we finished our homework. And, another thing he imposed on us was to behave in school, to behave because he didn't want to get any remarks about us misbehaving with the teacher.

Later, when Mrs. Saenz's father died and she moved in with her aunt in Kingsville, the encouragement and support from her family continued. Mrs. Saenz described her aunt's support of education: "She encouraged. She didn't want me to miss school any day. So, she got up early in the morning, fixed everything for me and so, I wouldn't be late. And then she'd have lunch for me at lunch time so I wouldn't be late again. And she just encouraged me. Like I said, I had to study. I had to study at night. There was a little room there where I would go and sit and I could study by myself because she always made sure that I studied the night before."

This encouragement and support at home was also significant in Mr. Yañez's life. Although he remembers his dad attending some of his high school basketball games, the constant presence and motivation from his parents stood out more vividly than any one experience in his memory. "They always encouraged us otherwise. I know that they were there. That they were there for us at all times." Mr. Ruiz's parents provided emotional and financial support during his young life. "My dad and my mom were, were very supportive of helping me, financially as well as they could and also getting into things of that sort, like Cub Scouts." Mr. Ruiz was very active in extracurricular activities and although his family lived on a ranch away from town, they would go to the meetings and take us back and forth. "My dad would work at the field all day on a tractor, hang up the tractor and come at 5:00 to pick me up after [football] practice so that I could get home and study." Mr. Ruiz's parents insisted the children get a good education. School was to be taken seriously. "Under no circumstances were we to stay at home and do [field] work or, unless we were sick. The work came after our education." His parents, like Mrs. Saenz's and Mr. Yañez's, were very understanding. "My dad was very supportive. He said, I don't care where you go or what as long as you get a college education."

Although their parents did not have much formal education, they encouraged them to continue their own and attend college. Perhaps because their parents had to work hard in order

to provide a living for their families, they saw education as a way to improve their children's lives. This work ethic and familism influenced all three educators and is part of their identity today. Mrs. Saenz's and Mr. Yañez's homes were filled with photos and other family memorabilia and during our conversations they frequently shared stories about their children. Mrs. Saenz seemed to have lost her own self-identity by simply summarizing her entire life story in the first five minutes of our conversation. Only through stories about her husband and daughter did she reveal personal experiences in her life. Unlike the other two educators who shared many personal stories of growing up, Mrs. Saenz had to be asked specific questions and then she frequently stated, "I'm bad at it" referring to her ability to remember details. Like their parents, all three educators valued an education and raised their own children stressing the need to go to college. For this reason, Mr. Ruiz continues to work today in order to support his daughter financially as she attends college herself. Each person learned important values from their family. The need to pursue further education was the next part of their lives.

Their School Experiences

Through their recollections of their school experiences and their teachers, they began to make ethnic identifications. Although Mr. Ruiz was the only one to have Mexican American teachers as a child, all attended schools that were predominantly minority. Each narrator had wonderful memories of their education and shared personal stories about teachers who had touched their own lives as they grew up. These role models, their involvement in extracurricular activities and their struggles to complete college shaped their lives and the individuals they are today.

Teachers

The teachers in Mrs. Saenz's and Mr. Yañez's schools were predominantly Anglo American. Mrs. Saenz stated, "No, all my teachers were Anglo even in college. I didn't have any Latin American teachers, not one, not even in high school." Mr. Yañez also could only recall Anglo teachers,

> I don't remember any Mexican American teachers at the high school. That I had or that we had in school. There weren't that many at my school. . . Over at Zavala [elementary], I had one individual. . . but as far as Chicano teachers, [none].

Through these discussions, they began to make their own ethnic identifications. Mrs. Saenz using Latin American and Mr. Yañez preferring to use Chicano in describing the lack of Mexican American teachers during their school years.

Mr. Ruiz believed that the majority of his teachers were Mexican American because San Diego, Texas was predominantly Mexican American. He shared, "In San Diego, basically 99% of our teachers were Mexican Americans." While he remembered no Mexican American professors at Texas A & M, at Texas A & I in Kingsville, they had several "Mexicanos" on staff.

The existence of Mexican American professors may have been due to the fact that the small college was set in a predominantly Mexican American community and attended by mostly Mexican American students during that time. Mr. Ruiz chose to identify Mexican Americans with the Spanish word Mexicanos perhaps because he was more segregated in his small community.

Extracurricular Activities

Not only did these three educators share similar experiences with Spanish and English, all learning English at school and at ages seven or eight, all were active participants in extracurricular activities during their youth. The activities they were involved in varied based on their interests. Mr. Ruiz was a very motivated individual joining and holding office in several school organizations. He stated, "I was active in football, basketball and I was active in Future Farmers of America. I was a district officer in 4-H and I was active in student council and as a class officer." San Diego High School also used to practice University Interscholastic League activities.

> We used to have intermurals, not the athletic type but the, like the prose reading, oral reading, one act plays where ordinary students could just compete not necessarily for UIL competition but just among the classes that gave us the opportunities to do some of those things.

In college, his interest in agriculture and his religious faith dictated his choice of activities. "I joined the Newman Club which is the Catholic club at the college level, and I joined vocational ag club because that was a given" since he was pursing an agricultural degree.

Mrs. Saenz who attended a small, rural school had limited opportunities to be involved in extracurricular activities during her education.

> Well, we were living in that ranch. There was nothing there, just to go to church and get catechism, but the place belonged to the Kenedys and they furnished a church and a priest and that's all we had just the school and there.

Her most vivid memory is of fund raising, "All they had, like I said, was just programs and I'll never forget selling candies. You had to sell candies for like a picnic or something like that." At Texas A & I in Kingsville, she became more active in the Nara Club and the Spanish Club. The Nara Club was similar to a sorority. "It was just girls and we'd have meetings and we'd go on trips and we had dances." The Spanish Club was sponsored by Texas A & I and Mrs. Saenz remembered, "We went on tours like to museums, things like that. We couldn't go anywhere cause we didn't have cars. So, it had to be done right there. We had like little programs where we'd perform."

While Mrs. Saenz's participation in extracurricular activities increased in college, Mr. Yañez along with his siblings was more active in high school. He stated, "We were much more

involved in school. All my people are involved in school activities, particularly in athletics, band or music." Mr. Yañez participated in all the athletic programs playing football, basketball, baseball and track. In college, he recalled being too busy trying to finish up his degree to be involved in extracurricular activities.

Various theories (Davidson, 1996; Ogbu, 1987; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 1993) have discussed the relationship between ethnic identification and academic engagement. Despite the different ways in which all three educators identified themselves ethnically, each had a very strong social identity which was displayed in their involvement at school. Each participant was involved in various extracurricular activities that seemed to be classified more by gender than race. Mr. Ruiz and Mr. Yañez were active in sports while Mrs. Saenz participated in the Spanish Club and a sorority. Her involvement in the Nara Club which she described as a sorority reinforced how well Mrs. Saenz assimilated into the American culture. Their active involvement in extracurricular activities also influenced their own classroom teaching. Each educator was very supportive of their own students, urging them to become involved and holding the same high expectations they had for themselves.

College Attendance

Mrs. Saenz, Mr. Yañez and Mr. Ruiz were all self-motivated and each had personal aspirations to attend college. Although their parents valued a good education and supported their decisions, the decision to pursue a degree was their own. None recalled being told to go to college but rather simply assuming college attendance was the next phase of their life. Mr. Yañez recalled that college was something all of his brothers and sisters assumed to be a natural step in their careers,

> I don't know exactly when I decided that I wanted to be a teacher cause I knew from the time I learned how to read, that I would get a college degree. And I think that all of us [his siblings] at one time or another, whether we talked about it, consciously said anything about it, I think we all decided we were going to go to school.

Having made the decision to attend college, the decision of which college to attend was simple as most elected to attend the college closest to home. Mrs. Saenz who lived in Kingsville, at the time attended Texas A & I because "I lived there so that was the cheapest for me." Mr. Yañez began his higher education at Del Mar in Corpus Christi because he lived half a mile from there. Del Mar was "the closest and cheapest. I didn't care where I went as long as I got a degree." When Mr. Yañez transferred from Del Mar, a two year college, to Texas A & I during his third year, completing his education became even more difficult financially. "It was hard. No money. Dad had been laid off in '61. When I graduated, he had been out of work, he had been laid off. But it was hard. . . and I didn't want to bother them for money."

Financial circumstances also influenced Mr. Ruiz's life. Because he initially had chosen to pursue a veterinary medicine degree, Texas A & M in College Station was his only choice, as it was the only school in Texas offering the program at that time. He attended Texas A & M for two years before the financial stress became too much and he transferred to Texas A & I in Kingsville. In Kingsville, Mr. Ruiz was limited to completing a bachelors degree in vocational education/vocational agriculture. He remembered discussing the situation with his father.

> Yes, my dad when I approached him and told him financially we could not afford to go to A & M anymore he understood my problem and I understood his situation and he said you have another option too. You can go to Kingsville, it's closer. It won't be as costly and I was fortunate enough to get a part-time job and at the same time support myself and go to school.

Because of their financial situations, all three worked as they attended college. Mrs. Saenz taught school and attended college on the weekends. Mr. Yañez and Mr. Ruiz returned home on weekends to work. Mr. Yañez worked at an upholstery shop and Mr. Ruiz drove the tractor on the family farm.

Their attendance in college and their experiences both in and out of the classroom during these times continued to shape their identities. During the late 1940s, career choices for women were limited. Mrs. Saenz began her college career preparing to be a secretary and then turned to teaching because of the money she could earn while she continued her schooling. Financial reasons also shaped the person Mr. Ruiz became. His first career choice, veterinarian, was influenced by his rural upbringing and teaching became the next closest choice when financial problems curtailed his attendance at Texas A & M. Social factors shaped Mr. Yañez's career choice. His decision to become a teacher could be traced to the positive experiences he had in school and the wonderful memories he shared regarding teachers who became his mentors and role models.

Role Models

Mrs. Saenz, Mr. Yañez and Mr. Ruiz constructed their self-identities through their interactions with their parents and the teachers that helped them get an education. Their memories of teachers who served as role models seemed to stand out as was evident in their tone and vividness of their descriptions. Some of the teachers they met early in life, others when they entered college, but the common theme that made these teachers special was simply the fact that they cared. All three educators shared memories of how individual teachers touched their lives, encouraging, supporting, motivating, and caring for them.

Mr. Ruiz first remembered his first grade teacher.

> Well, I definitely remember my first grade teacher, Ms. Jesusa Garcia. They always called [her] Ms. Chucha and mainly because she was very calm, a very compassionate person. She had a lot of interest in us. She was kind of like a second mother and made

> sure that we maintained an interest in school. She would really work with us to learn to speak English.

Mr. Ruiz remembered Jesusa Garcia as caring and motivating,

> You wanted to show her that you could do the lesson and that you wanted to learn and automatically you just kept on learning. Basically once you get going, she got you motivated, you were under her wing. You just wanted to stay with her.

In high school, Mr. Ruiz remembered Mr. James Baker.

> Mr. Baker was a Vocational Ag teacher and he also [was] very caring towards his students. He went out of his way to help us in any way. It was a requirement for us to have a project for Vocational Ag, show something at a stock show. He would make arrangements at the feed stores where we could get credit until we sold our animals, then we could pay off our bill.

The extent to which these teachers went out of their personal way to help their students seemed to stand out in Mr Ruiz's mind and made these teachers special. For example, Mr. Ruiz recalled one of his English teachers in high school, Mrs. Bernada Jaime.

> She was also very helpful in that she would go out of her way and stay late after school many times to work on school activities and help us. I remember practicing with her a lot of our UIL activities, and she would spend many hours at school, at home, after school, weekends, with us, to get us ready so we could compete.

The need to reciprocate the efforts put out by teachers also motivated Mrs. Saenz to please her teachers. Her role models were those teachers who seemed to encourage and challenge her. She remembered,

> I had a teacher in high school, her name was Ms. Bosworth, she was from Bishop and she taught math. She was so good at it that I admired her so much and I would really put myself into math because I wanted to please her. At the same time I was learning so much . . . I don't think I'll ever forget her.

Mrs. Saenz's role models were teachers much like the teachers Mr. Ruiz experienced. Terms frequently used to describe teachers were: "They cared." These teachers served as inspiration. In college, Mrs. Saenz met Mr. Smith a Spanish professor.

> He encouraged us very much you know. I sort of looked up at him because you could go and ask him for any advice even though it didn't concern the Spanish because he taught Spanish. He was there ready for you at any time. He'd help you with whatever you wanted, a schedule or a problem you had in another class.

She summarized by stating she learned a lot from him.

Mr. Yañez began by suggesting that almost every child has a teacher as a role model ". . . and to a great extent that's who my role models were, teachers, coaches that I consider to be successful." In junior high, he remembered Coach Ray Nichols as a gentleman and English teachers he considered great because they cared.

> They cared for what we did, for what I did and maybe they cared because I cared about my grades and I cared that what I did was good or better than anybody else's, not that I competed to be the best but I was not going to be, I would not accept being the worst.

He seemed to have no difficulty naming previous teachers who served as role models and stood out in his mind even today.

> In high school, I had a couple of English teachers that were just absolutely great. I had a math teacher that was, Mrs. Robertson, best ever and I had in English, Ms. Trantham, Lindsay, great people. In government, I had a teacher by the name of Keen, and if anybody had influence into going into the government major/minor, it was him.

Mr. Yañez believed his teachers challenged him because they knew he had an interest. In describing his experiences at the community college, the enthusiasm and pride in his voice were clearly evident as he spoke of his memories.

> Oh, God Del Mar, that was the best place that ever happened. I had some teachers there, that took an interest. I was interested in history and government and I had some of the best teachers in the world that were created . . . I knew every history professor and government professor that was out there and they took a kind of special interest in me . . . I had wonderful experiences at Del Mar.

The relationships that they formed with their mentors were very supportive and motivating. These role models nurtured them and shaped their identities as future teachers. As teachers, they treated their students as they were taught, challenging and motivating them. Mr. Ruiz's teachers encouraged him to compete in agricultural competitions and he later encouraged his students, "I kept talking to them that they needed to go beyond high school. They needed to go to college." Even as a principal he continued motivating his staff as he had been by his mentors, "I was always complimenting them." Mrs. Saenz stated her students were very successful, "because I encouraged them a lot." She cared about her students the way she remembered her teachers caring and was genuinely glad that another teacher had been able to motivate the one student she had failed in her forty years of teaching. Mr. Yañez referred to teachers impressing him to the point where he wanted to please them and he summarized that within his years of teaching he has served as a role model for some of his students. Their classroom experiences and teacher shaped their identities. As students Mr. Ruiz, Mr. Yañez and Mrs. Saenz were influenced by positive role models and as teachers they positively shaped the experiences and identities of their students.

Discrimination

While their lives were modeled after the care they received from parents and teachers, their identities were also influenced by other experiences. They encountered discrimination and made choices that later influenced their lives.

Language

The lives of these teachers were also tied by the issue of language, when they learned English and which language they used during their childhood. None of them learned to speak English until they entered the first grade at their local elementary schools; however, even after they learned English each continued to speak predominantly in Spanish. Mrs. Saenz recalled the contradictions she encountered with language. At school, she was required to speak English.

> If you started speaking Spanish the teacher would put us in the corner and say, 'I will not speak Spanish again,'" but within the neighborhood, "everybody spoke Spanish. In fact, if we would speak English to somebody else it was '*ay que*,' you know they used to make fun of you. So, we didn't speak English because everybody would make fun of you, so we spoke Spanish all the time.

Within the small ranch town of Sarita, a person speaking English was viewed as a snob, someone trying to appear to be better than everyone else, so Mrs. Saenz continued speaking in Spanish except in school.

Mrs. Saenz suggested that people in her community were used to speaking in Spanish so there was little need for English. Mr. Yañez also recalled the limited need for English, "It was primarily a Mexican American neighborhood. You didn't need English, therefore nobody learned it. You know, for the kids anyway." As a child he spoke only Spanish, "I was illiterate in English. I couldn't speak anything in English. I was seven years old when I started and I picked up the English language then, seven year old." Yet, like Mrs. Saenz, he continued to speak Spanish at home without any encouragement to practice the English language.

Mr. Ruiz also had limited opportunities to practice the English language, ". . . all of the communication at home was in Spanish. All our relatives were non-English speakers. So, we basically communicated mostly in Spanish. The English that we learned, we learned it at school and we practiced it at school." He, like the others, began learning English when he entered the first grade yet continued speaking Spanish away from the school.

While all three learned English at school and continued speaking Spanish at home describing the reasons for these choices, it was Mrs. Saenz's experiences that clearly shaped her identity. She described a familiar situation for minorities assimilating into the American culture, frequently, personal choices must be made between characteristics which identify a ethnic group and characteristics of success (Davidson, 1996). When she tried to use her English, she was criticized and labeled a snob. As parents, she and her husband spoke only English to their daughter who later had great difficulty understanding Spanish, a problem that continues with her grandchildren. Mrs. Saenz raised in a very traditional upbringing did not recall experiencing any discrimination and perhaps that could be attributed to the way she assimilated into the American

identity. However, her assimilation seemed to come at the expense of her ethnic identity as a Mexican American.

Politics and their Careers

As Mexican Americans, Mr. Yañez and Mr. Ruiz dealt with discrimination in their lives yet they encountered it in several different ways. Mrs. Saenz felt she did not experience any discrimination growing up instead, discrimination or rumors of it were not voiced until she was working for the Alice Independent School District. She recalled hearing the rumors, "I heard a lot about it, that Alice was doing a lot of discrimination and I was told but I never felt any." Although Mrs. Saenz never experienced discrimination personally, she heard gossip that at the high school staff members were having problems with discrimination, and that it was difficult to compete against Anglos for a job in the district.

Mr. Ruiz believed that living in a town that was predominantly Mexican American in population prevented him from directly experiencing any discrimination.

> Since the majority of our kids in our schools and the schools that we competed with were Mexican Americans, it was Mexican Americans against Mexican Americans the majority of the time and we did have, I know we had some discrimination, but we basically did not have a big problem with it.

However, even as a young student on school trips he recognized differential treatment. He recalled,

> I know that at that time, we couldn't, they wouldn't take us to certain restaurants because they wouldn't allow us . . . sometimes they would just buy us the hamburgers and bring them in a box to the bus because they didn't allow us to go in.

Mr. Ruiz's ethnic identity was shaped by this adolescent experience, having to eat on the school bus because Mexican Americans were not allowed inside, and by his experiences as a teacher.

Mr. Ruiz's biggest problem was dealing with the politics involved with being a teacher. While working in Encino, he was told by district officials to work the polls on election day, instructing voters on how to vote. He recalled, "They closed down the school on election day and made us work at elections." As a teacher, he felt he had enormous influence, "Well, since we were teachers and normally they [community members] look towards the teachers as people you can trust and . . . that's not the way that I looked at it." Mr. Ruiz experienced great personal conflict over the position he was placed in resulting in his resignation and transfer to Alice. Mr. Ruiz had earned a position as a teacher which during those days was looked on with respect, but he found himself struggling with himself. His self-concept diminished as he had to do something he did not personally agree with and this experience influenced his teaching style. As a Mexican American teacher, he felt it necessary to prepare his students for the challenges they, as minorities, would face one day.

> I told them that things were not going to be easy for them. I remember helping a lot, communicat[ing] with colleges and universities, getting applications, applying for scholarships, participating in UIL activities, class officers, high school so they can get some background so they could understand and be able to defend themselves if they needed to.

Mr. Ruiz seemed to understand that despite an education his Mexican American students would face conflicts like he had during his life. He used his experiences to help shape the self-concepts his students were developing, reminding them that an education would improve their lives as he had been told as a student years ago.

Mr. Yañez's life was touched even more by experiences with discrimination. In 1961, he was hired by the Alice Independent School District and became the only Chicano on the high school faculty. "Nobody else in the faculty was Chicano. I was the only one and then later, the next year I think a Spanish teacher came in." Mr. Yañez though was well aware of what he was getting into when he was hired and believed his mentor and superintendent knew as well.

> It was funny but I knew what was happening. I knew and we both knew. I think MaCrockland and Dewey Smith, who hired me, the superintendent, we knew what we were doing. By hiring me as the, there had been one before, but I was the only one there. I wasn't the first one to be hired by the system in high school, but I was the only one there that year. They knew what they were doing. They wanted to have some representation.

The discrimination Mr. Yañez experienced came from all sides, from teachers and from students and he recognized it for what it was.

> As a teacher, we had to fight that [discrimination] almost everyday. Well, not so much anymore, but the first, I'd say the first fifteen years, twenty years, there was always a period where you had to prove to the kid that you were smart enough to be the teacher.

Mr. Yañez also felt, but did not personally experience discrimination from the faculty. "I don't know how to put this, but there was a great deal of discrimination that went on within the, with, you know I wasn't stupid, I knew what was happening." Although he struggled to phrase the circumstances of the times, one particular experience he recalled with vivid details.

> I remember a situation that occurred where a, one of my students, who turned out to be one of my better friends. He wanted to run for the president of the student council and the principal at the time said he was not eligible. And then reading the constitution of the student council, he was and anyway he ran and won the election, but was disqualified by the man. And I remember one of the kids came and asked me what I could do about it and I said, in my position right now very little.

The disqualification of this student as president based on his ethnicity found Mr. Yañez helpless because he did not want to lose his job. His inability to intervene makes this experience one of

the low points in Mr. Yañez's career, "A low point in my [career] because I was powerless to do anything about it. I didn't fear for my job, but I wanted to stay."

Mr. Yañez's experiences with discrimination profoundly shaped his ethnic identity. He identified himself as a Chicano which has historically been associated with activism and a rejection of American/Anglo values (Petersen, 1997). This definition was not unknown to Mr. Yañez who stated he did not want to sound "radical." While he could not voice his anger during his early years as a teacher, today Mr. Yañez challenges various issues that he perceives as unfair.

Their Views of Teaching

The influence of their personal experiences was most evident in how they shaped their teaching styles. They were as enthusiastic and motivating as the teachers that had influenced their lives. They seemed to complete a cycle in which the role of the school was to shape the students' identities. Teachers shaped their lives and each in turn influenced the students they had during their teaching careers.

Significant Points in their Careers

Mr. Yañez's experience in which he was powerless to help a student was his low point and he described "Just walking into a classroom" as a high point. "Every year is a new year. Every year is a new experience . . . I love the classroom. It's great." The enthusiasm he has maintained even after thirty-six years is amazing not only to hear in his voice but to watch the expressions that filter across his face. Mr. Yañez met each phase of his life with enthusiasm and continues today. He genuinely enjoyed school and works hard to make his own classroom a place of learning and excitement. He seems to identify his role as a teacher who motivates and challenges students by being enthusiastic about learning.

Mrs. Saenz's low and high points dealt with her students. She described, "Every time they made a better grade, I felt like I was doing something." But she modestly expressed what she considered her failures as a teacher.

> Well, I had some children that didn't learn. I had some that did and I had some that didn't. In fact, in all my career, I only failed one child and that was because he was just not interested. He'd go home and there was no one there. I never could contact the mother to talk with her and like I said, I only retained one child in all the years that I was in school.

Mrs. Saenz saw herself as personally responsible for the success of her students. Her job as a teacher was to challenge and help her students succeed academically. She was able to name former students and their successes as lawyers and doctors but her one failure stood out vividly since she saw her job as providing success.

Mr. Ruiz's low points were during his teaching in Encino. When he arrived as a new teacher, he had to make many changes in a vocational agriculture class that was being used as a dumping ground. Getting students and faculty to accept the changes was difficult.

> Well, the fact that I had to work so hard to convince them that we couldn't go [down] that road that they had been using in the past. That we had change the road and that we had to do some things differently.

However, it is with sadness that he describes what he considers his biggest low point.

> Probably the low point was the fact that I left a group of boys in Rio Grande City that I still see quite often some of them and I regretted that I didn't fulfill some of their projects. That I left them and they had projects.

By resigning during the summer because of his personal dilemmas with the politics in Encino, Mr. Ruiz left behind his students who he had already begun preparing for the following year. This experience shaped Mr. Ruiz personally by challenging his values as a teacher and resulting in a career change.

Regret filled his voice because he had already experienced initial success with this group of students, "Out of two hundred and some odd teams that went to the A & M (vocational agriculture) competition, to the state competition, we came out thirty-eight which was definitely very good." Another high point in Mr. Ruiz's career was the success of his students in Alice.

> I basically remember one class. I guess I had been there for about three years. That particular class, I remember I had about 35 kids wall to wall but I had some of the sharpest kids that had ever grew in Alice, Texas. Many of those have, I kept talking to them that they needed to go beyond high school. They needed to go to college . . . and I encouraged them to think about the future and what they wanted to be and today, I'm happy to say that about 60% of those kids are very successful lawyers, doctors, engineers, nurses, school teachers, administrators, many of them.

Like Mrs. Saenz, Mr. Ruiz remembered the success of his students. His teachers encouraged him to pursue an education and shaped his teaching style. He challenged his students to continue their own education as Mr. Ruiz's teachers had encouraged him.

Positive and Negative Changes

My conversations with these teachers ended with my asking what changes had they seen in general and in the education field. The biggest change in Mr. Ruiz's mind was the technological advances education had made.

> Oh, education has moved, has changed a lot, from a very basic type to a very technological now. Computers have come in and we've changed so many things. I learn everyday and after forty years I still learn something everyday.

However, Mr. Ruiz believed the biggest negative change has been in the area of parental involvement.

> Probably the lack of parental support in many instances and as the years go by the lack of parent support is less and less. Parents become more violent and less understanding. They say, 'No, my son didn't do that,' when we know for a fact that their son did do it, that their son had admitted that he did it. Sometimes it's hard to convince parents and they get very belligerent, very outspoken.

This change in attitudes and discipline was also considered a problem in Mrs. Saenz's conversations. She frequently mentioned the growing discipline problems Alice schools are facing. She described,

> Right now it's the discipline. They're having it real bad. They can, they could be able to do a much better job if the children would cooperate, but in every room they have to have two or three that disturb the whole class and you don't have time for the others. So, it's been bad.

While she was glad she was out of the educational field because of this growing discipline problem, she recognized the increase in success students were facing now. "

> Well, the biggest gain now is that more kids are going to college now. Most everybody now is going to college. Maybe two or three that are not but most everybody. They manage to go either with a loan or with a scholarship or whatever. So, at least somebody imposed on them you know that education was important.

Mr. Yañez was more cautious in his discussion of educational changes he has seen during the years because he felt he could only judge by the experiences he had had in Alice. "I can't compare cause I've never been anywhere else, but from what I hear, you know, we have a good system and I think we do. My kids compete. They're able to compete scholastically and otherwise." However, he was adamant in his feelings that not all changes were necessary, ". . . we try so many things here as far as educational programs. In many cases, we try new things just to try and then don't follow up on them." Mr. Yañez is a firm believer that the basics must still be at the core of the curriculum,

> I still say that the curriculum is extremely important. The curriculum is extremely important, but just changing something for change sakes is not necessarily right. The kids still has to learn how to read, still has to learn how to write. He still has to learn how to use the pencil in making computations.

Mr. Yañez has also seen changes within the Chicano community.

> They've been positive to a great extent. We have I'd say that more than half of the faculty is Chicano now. So, I've seen the Chicano community get involved also in the educational field because hell, the opportunities that opened up you know. Mom and dad make more money. They were able to send their kids to school.

Mr. Yañez described this growing involvement of Chicanos in the community with a great deal of enthusiasm. "So, there's a great deal of involvement in the Chicano community, in the educational field and in the political field the same thing . . . The whole thing, the birth of, the rise of the Chicano is apparent." He worried that he would sound radical, but it is his own words that express the need for listening to and learning from the Chicano community, ". . . the Chicano community has something to offer and has had all these many years and it's being heard of now." Mr. Yañez did not want to sound extreme but in fact he is an activist and in education this type of person may be considered dangerous. Within the boundaries of the educational community, his ideas and opinions challenge the status quo.

Lessons Learned

As Mr. Ruiz, Mr. Yañez and Mrs. Saenz shared personal recollections of growing up and teaching, they also portrayed how their self-identities were constructed. The support of their family, the wonderful teachers who served as role models and their school experiences shaped their racial and personal self-concepts. Mr. Ruiz raised in a predominantly Mexican American town identified himself as a Mexicano, while Mrs. Saenz raised traditionally in a rural town preferred to use Latin Americans. Mr. Yañez who voiced the most challenging thoughts appropriately identified himself as a Chicano. While as a young teacher he felt powerless, today he enthusiastically voices his anger at the lack of recognition Chicanos and South Texas have been given. Each educators' self-identity was shaped by their social interactions with others particularly in the classroom. Their positive school experiences contributed to their success as teachers. They modeled themselves after the teachers that had touched their own lives. They in turn then challenged, cared for and motivated their students has they had been. This active teaching style allowed them to open up educational opportunities for their students.

Social forces and interactions influence personal development and schools serve as stages for cultural and social reproduction (Davidson, 1996). Through these oral histories, we learn the power that teachers have in shaping the self-concepts of their students. Students have the ability to make choices and act on them and teachers should nurture the meaning students bring to school so that they may become academically engaged. There is a variety of ways individuals practice different aspects of their social identity therefore, it is imperative for teachers to consider multiple perspectives in their teaching.

These teachers may have ethnically identified themselves differently, but each had a very positive social identity as a teacher. All felt a sense of accomplishment in their decision to enter the educational field. They enthusiastically shared their successes and their failures with rich descriptions. Mrs. Saenz, Mr. Ruiz and Mr. Yañez shared some similar experiences in their lives yet each has traveled different roads. Sharing personal biographies of this type allows us to

illuminate these roads so that we may know not only how far we have traveled but also how much further we must go.

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